

UNDER DEVELOPMENT

On top of the world

What would you take if you were planning to climb Mount Everest? David Robinson treks to the top of the world with just a PDA, a camera, a phone and an MP3 player

Well, I'm back from the Everest trip, which I survived without any major mishaps (more by good luck than good management, I should add). I was asked to go by my friend Lee, who left his job as MD of one of our major customers in the USA last year to set up his own company. Trekking up Everest to the Base Camp site had been a major ambition of his for years and, having now established his new enterprise, he asked a number of friends to go with him. I was the only one dim enough to say yes.

Breaks from work such as this are obviously disruptive, but they also have the wonderful effect of forcing you to get organised and delegate absolutely everything you don't have to do yourself. It also means sorting out your communications so that, if needs be, you can make decisions and implement solutions from afar. On most of my previous trips abroad, however, I've had a reasonable prospect of getting the internet, a mobile phone connection and a continuous supply of one essential element for computing: electricity.

KIT FOR THE TOP

This time I had to make some critical decisions about which equipment to take and how it might be used. It didn't help that these choices were made against a background of considerable ignorance – so nothing new there, then. The big factors affecting my choices were size, weight, battery life, power consumption and the possibility of getting a recharge en route. That ruled out the new Toshiba (see *Under Development*, Shopper 236).

On previous trips abroad my computing tool of choice had been the JVC sub-notebook. It's small and has swappable batteries and WiFi through a CardBus card, but once the batteries go flat they need a decent supply of power (and time) to recharge. As I had no idea what power would be available, I decided against it.

A better option might be the Palm Tungsten PDA. It's small, very light and has built-in WiFi and a



reasonable battery life. Another plus is the short recharge time, and the charger requires only 5.2 volts, which I could reproduce from one of those emergency mobile phone rechargers that run on AA batteries.

SNAP DECISION

When it came to cameras, I basically had three choices: a small compact, a full-on SLR or something in between. Compacts are OK for snapshots, but I wanted some decent landscape shots. The best tool for that would be something like Alan's Canon EOS 30D, which has interchangeable lenses and lots of megapixels – what more could I want? Well, something that runs off Duracells would be nice, as would a little less weight, as every item I took would need to be lugged uphill either by me or a poor Sherpa.

Eventually I opted for my trusty old Fujifilm FinePix 602. It's five years old and, although it cost an arm and a leg when new, it's now worth about four pence. It still takes damn good pictures, though – up to six megapixels – and accepts an add-on wide-angle lens. If it was damaged, lost or stolen, I could replace it with the modern equivalent: a FinePix S9600, which costs a shade over £200. Keef's just bought one and it looks like a lot of camera for the money, especially if you don't really need interchangeable lenses.

For entertainment I chose my very simple no-name MP3 player, again on the basis that it's powered by a single replaceable AAA battery

rather than a rechargeable one.

With that and two SD cards – one with music and the other with recordings of *Gardeners' Question Time* and *The News Quiz* from Radio 4 – I'd have some chance of avoiding being bored to death on the flights to and from Kathmandu.

Finally, I had to decide which phone to take. I recently replaced my old Nokia 6310 with a Nokia N73, as the contract allows for upgrades every 12 to 18 months. This phone has a stack of features (most of which I don't use), including two cameras. Why two? Dunno.

The main problem with the N73 is battery life. The old phone would go for six days without a recharge; this one lasts for three at best. Mrs R also recently upgraded from a 6310 to a Nokia N95 (which has even more features and an even shorter battery life), so I opted to charge both batteries from the old phones and move my SIM card back to the 6310. After all, I only wanted it for making phone calls. What else is a phone for?

POWER TRIP

So how did it work out in practice? Kathmandu should have been easy, as there was a mains socket in the hotel room. Getting at it was another matter, though, as Lee had acquired a fully featured BlackBerry for the trip and spent so much time messing with it that it needed constant recharging. And when Lee wasn't using the socket, the chances were there'd be no

electricity as the supply was extremely unreliable.

Beyond Lukla – the starting point for Everest treks – my decision to choose equipment that used normal batteries was totally vindicated. After that point, I didn't see a single thing with a wheel on it – not even a bike or a cart, let alone a car or truck. The camera worked wonderfully, taking more than 600 pictures and eight movies on a total of eight AA cells. The only problem of note occurred one very cold morning when a relatively fresh set of batteries simply wouldn't keep the camera powered up. The low temperature was preventing the cells delivering a current; the solution was to warm them up to body temperature.

CALL WAITING

The Nokia used one battery on the way up and the second one on the way back down. This may seem a lot given that the only place you could actually get a signal was Namche. However, Lee's BlackBerry wouldn't work there (or anywhere else), and neither would the phones of several other members of the party, so mine took a bit of stick with people phoning home to say they were OK.

The Tungsten PDA never got used as I couldn't find a WiFi point. Instead, I paid 10 rupees a minute (about nine pence) for a connection at an 'internet café'. This was something of a misnomer as (a) there was no food or drink and (b) the connection was so slow as to be almost unusable. A single email sent via Yahoo! Mail took over 10 minutes to send and cost a quid.

How much?!?

When the rest of the group worked out that I came from Yorkshire this became a well-used catchphrase whenever payment for anything was required.

Now it's nose to the keyboard to clear the truly horrendous backlog of work. **CS**

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